THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

When You Pray...Say...Father

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I know that praying confidently does not seem to be a problem for many people. Some of my best friends are easy pray-ers. They are apparently on comfortable terms with God, and they have little compunction about speaking as if the more they go into their inner life, the closer they are to God ... My own inclinations are different. It is just that I have been overwhelmed by the audacity which is involved in the fact of *our* invoking *God.* If praying is chatting with our alter egos, then it comes fairly easily. But if praying is talking to God in response to God's involvement with us, then we best beware lest we confuse the Almighty with some divine chum.

David Willis
Daring Prayer

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WHEN YOU PRAY ... SAY ... FATHER

"As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him." Psalm 103:13

"As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." Isaiah 66:13

Dear God, we have come here out of busy lives for a few moments of quiet reflection. We come to lift up our voices and our spirits and our minds to worship you. And we have come to listen for the word you have for us this day. So speak your word through our words. May this time together bring us closer to you; may we be open to your presence in our lives and may we know anew the incredible mystery of your love for us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

* * *

At some point early in my ministry – I don't remember exactly when – I received clear homiletic instructions from my mother. She was a careful listener to sermons. She took the responsibility seriously. She listened and thought about what the minister said and we often heard her and Dad discuss the sermon she expected that the preacher would invest at least as much in the process as she did. She did not gush over my sermons. She let me know early on – gently – that she thought they were perhaps a bit ambitious, that it might not be necessary to review the entire sweep of ancient history as a preface to something Jesus said, and that I probably didn't need to take the congregation through a labyrinth of Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic every week, and listening to her reflections on the sermons she was hearing on Sunday morning, I learned to apply the "so what?" test to every one of mine If there's no answer to that question, then it probably isn't worth their time. She read all of mine, was appropriately supportive and one time early on, she said to me, "Our minister is preaching a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. John, I've been a Presbyterian all my life. I've heard a lot of sermons. If I have to sit through another series on the Lord's Prayer, I think I'll croak!"

I have taken her thinly-veiled admonition seriously. I have never done it. But now, with some fear and trembling, I've decided to do it. I do hope none of you croaks. But if you do, I'll know why and Mother would understand.

Someone suggested recently that the prayer Jesus taught his disciples is probably being prayed somewhere in the world by someone in one of the world's tongues – English, Spanish, Chinese, Hindi, Swahili, Arabic, German – every minute of every day. The Lord's Prayer is, one scholar notes, "the most widespread form of religious utterance. It is the form of faith which is probably learned first. The Lord's Prayer is the faith in the 'mother tongue.'" [David Willis, *Daring Prayer*, p. 47]

I was in a worship service recently being led by Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, for a conference of distinguished and important church leaders. Instead of the liturgical mantra we all use, "let us pray the prayer our Lord taught his disciples," Joan said simply, "and now let us pray the prayer we learned as children." I think that was the moment I decided to do this series. And I have not stopped thinking about the fact that all, or nearly all of us, learned this prayer as young children. All, or very nearly all of us, can recite it by memory. It may be the only religious liturgy we know by heart. We pray it, or at least say it, in public worship, at funerals, and weddings.

In fact, so thoroughly do we know these words that we can, and do, utter them mechanically, by rote, mostly without the slightest thought about their meaning … a liturgical hyphen – the long prayer is over and we can go home soon.

There are, of course, big assumptions behind this prayer, bold affirmations, actually. There is a theology here – a "compendium of the faith" the ancient theologian, Tertullian called it.

Jesus prayed regularly, apparently. A faithful Jew, he would have committed to memory many of the Psalms, the hymns and prayers of his people. His prayers would have included that poetic resource. And he must have prayed more personally – without the use of liturgical resource. That's what his disciples asked him about one time. "Teach us to pray" they asked, because what Jesus was doing was apparently not familiar to them. And this, as you know was his response:

> "When you pray, say:
> Father, hallowed be your name.
> Your kingdom come.
> Give us each day our daily bread.
> And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive
> everyone indebted to us.
> And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Matthew has a slightly different version. And scholars have always liked to point out that technically it may not be a prayer at all, but a model or an example for how to pray, a format, an outline. Although more recent and more accurate translations put it simply as a small prayer: "When you pray, say …"

"Father" … it was a stunning thing for him to say. The genius of his own religion was that it did not have a name for God. Israel, from the very beginning, knew that when you name something you at least imply that you understand it and exercise some degree of control over it. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are given the responsibility of naming all the other creatures, the surest guarantee that they were in change of the garden.

We know a lot about that dynamic, by the way. "Why should we be called 'Indians'?" ask some of the people who were here a thousand years before European explorers bumped into North America in the process of trying to get to India. "Why should our name reflect an enormous European navigator's blunder?" "Why should we be called something we choose not to be called?" Has it ever happened to you? Have you ever been called something you did not like to be called? Fat, ugly, short, skinny, stupid, slow? If so, you know the power of a name.

Worse yet, we now know that if you call someone a name long and persistently enough, he/she conforms to the name. Call a person lazy and sooner or later he/she will be lazy. Call your child stupid or unreliable enough times and sure enough, that's what the child will be.

We know that racism begins with names. The Third Reich launched its holocaust with rhetoric, "The Jewish Problem," then "the solution to the Jewish Problem," then "swine, filthy swine." A final favorite designation was Jewish "bacillus" – an infection in the body which must be stamped out. It began, not with laws and concentration camps, but with nouns and verbs.

Language is important. What you call something is a powerful dynamic. The Hebrews knew that every tribe and nation around them had its own god or gods, many of them female, goddesses of fertility – all with elaborate names. And their genius was their sense of God's oneness, God's transcendence, God's inclusion of everything

meant by all the tribal gods and goddesses. And so, in order to make their point, God would have no name that human beings could pronounce or write down. When in their writing they had to designate God, they wrote a peculiar sequence of Hebrew consonants, unpronounceable – JHWH – into which we insert some vowels so we can pronounce it so it comes out "Jahweh," God of the Hebrews and from which comes the English Jehovah.

So serious a matter was this that Israel believed you could not say it – God's name – and live. You cannot see God and live. When Moses is sent by God on a mission to Egypt to free the slaves, he asks God – "Who shall I say sent me?" Do you remember the answer? "Tell them I Am Who I Am sent you," which is provocative theologically but not terribly helpful for the purposes of specific identification. And do you remember that wonderful occasion when Moses asks God directly, actually nags at God – to see God and God finally relents, but hides Moses in a cleft in a rock and allows him just a quick look – not at God's face, but God's back side!

The Hebrews were brilliantly cautious about this matter of naming God and furthermore they made a clean end run around the whole matter of God's gender … if you are going to dare to put a mental image in place of God in Hebrew, you have to have a man and a woman. "Let us make humankind in our image," God says in the first chapter of Genesis. "So God created humankind in his image, male and female."

So, for what it's worth, at the very heart of our tradition is a notion of God that tries to be very careful about limiting God by using human terms and names and characteristics and particularly gender. "In God's image – male and female." Vanderbilt theologian, Sallie McFague wonders "what all the fuss is about when God is imaged in female terms or addressed as "she" in light of the very clear point in Genesis One." [*Models of God*, p. 97]

Phyllis Trible, a distinguished theologian, points out that at some point in religious discourse, particularly Judeo-Christian discourse, you have to call God something and use adjectives and proper names and pronouns and metaphors and that the Bible also calls God Warrior, Husband, King and Father – strongly masculine images. And the Bible calls God Midwife, Mistress, Birthgiver and Mother." [*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 22]

For a variety of reasons, there are more masculine images. It was a patriarchal culture. And by the time of Jesus, it was a completely patriarchal culture. By Jesus' time, all the images of strength, wisdom and power, were masculine. It wasn't that way earlier in Israel. Subsequently, scripture was copied, taught and interpreted by a church whose hierarchy over time completely eliminated the leadership and presence of women. Add to all of that the single but all-important fact that English has no gender-neutral personal pronoun. You have to say "he" or "she" and so you have a theology that has become almost exclusively masculine. But insofar as that is true, it is a seriously flawed, idolatrous theology; insofar as your only images of God are masculine, you have an incomplete God. If the only name you have for God is "father" you are limiting God and your own relationship to God.

Jesus said, "When you pray, say Father." Jesus, someone points out, never prayed without addressing God as Father – his father. Some of that is a problem of translation and some a result of a patriarchal culture. But I do not believe those explanations exhaust the subject. In fact, they have a way of missing the real point which was the stunning intimacy – the closeness – the humanness of this way of addressing God.

"Abba," he said elsewhere. "Abba – Father" – the intimate Aramaic word children used within the family circle. It may sound peculiarly sentimental, but the only English translation is "Daddy." That was a stunning thing to say about the holy one whose name was not to be pronounced. And the point, of course, is that Jesus did not call God Father – or Abba – in the context of a theological discussion of the attributes of God, but as a mode of very personal relationship: a way, not of talking about God, but with God.

As a matter of fact, what we mean by "father" and what Jesus meant is separated by 2,000 years of history and vast cultural change. Sam Keene, who wrote about men and fathers, points out that the Industrial Revolution radically changed the role of fathers and mothers. Before the Industrial Revolution, when the vast majority of people occupied themselves with the basic tasks of providing food, shelter and clothing, men and women had to work together. Fathers were present – almost universally – in the lives of their children on a daily, hourly basis. The carpenter shop, or the tin shop, was part of the home. Fathers had to teach sons the daily tasks of living. Men and women worked in the fields – sometimes harnessed to a plow together. The Industrial Revolution took men away from home from morning until night and left parenting to women.

When Jesus used the image of father, it was pre-Industrial Revolution father. In fact, David Willis, who has written a fine book on the prayer says, "Some of the qualities of tenderness, care and patient nurturing commonly associated with mother in our culture are also present in the word Jesus uses for father." [*Daring Prayer*, p. 51]

It has never seemed to make sense to me to try to eliminate role differentiation altogether. To be sure, some of us had to learn that men are not genetically disinclined from cooking, doing dishes, bathing babies, changing diapers. We came to love it. Some of us came of age too late to enjoy what we see our sons and daughters doing by way of shared parenting and know we are poorer for it.

But women carry babies in their bodies and bear infants and nurse infants and fathers know, intimately, that they are not and cannot be mothers – at best spectators to the critical events, cheerleaders, hand holders, water carriers.

What fathers do know about is their own powerlessness and vulnerability – regardless of all their posturing and huffing and puffing. There comes a time for fathers when the limits of one's ability to provide and care for and make things right is terribly and painfully clear. Madeleine L'Engle once quipped that to be a parent is to be only as happy as your least happy child. Fathers know that with a particular sensitivity, I think, because the culture assigns to you the job of taking care of everyone and making everything right and sometimes you can't do it. The most painful experience I can remember was watching the cart bearing my young son to surgery disappear behind the elevator door in the hospital and I couldn't do a thing. I couldn't do it for him, couldn't even go with him.

So when Jesus used an intimate name, a name which includes presence, closeness of heart, and vulnerability, to address God, it was a defining and stunning moment.

It invites us to go into the depths of our own spirituality, our own souls. Those who think most profoundly and eloquently about the human condition sometimes describe us as orphans, searching for parents and home, longing for a father's or mother's blessing. Who doesn't wish – wistfully – for a conversation about this or that with mother or father? Who doesn't in some way continue those conversations after they're gone? Who hasn't experienced at life's high and holy moments – the marriage of your children, baptism of your grandchild, election to office, promotion, big bonus, case won, book published, a twinge of regret – "I wish my Dad or Mom could be here – could be part of this – could see me now – could add her/his blessing to this occasion."?

The novelist Thomas Wolfe said that we never stop searching for that and we do know in a terrible way the pain and damage inflicted by parents, particularly fathers unfortunately, who not only don't give their blessing but abandon their children, literally, by engaging in the act of conception and then disappearing, or figuratively by emotional, intellectual and spiritual abandonment.

There is simply no more urgent matter before us than the epidemic of single mothers abandoned by the fathers of their children. We simply must find a way and it will involve a complex matrix of education, economics,

available jobs and housing, personal counseling and very serious legal repercussions to stop the epidemic of abandoned children, fatherless children, who will carry the scars of their abandonment forever.

We know, as well, the unspeakable tragedy of abuse and the spiritual scars it leaves. In a fine motion picture, *Good Will Hunting*, a brilliant young man is in the process of throwing his life away, in minor brushes with the law – assault, petty theft, drunkenness – when his genius is discovered by an MIT professor. The psychologist he agrees finally to see, is himself seriously damaged by the recent death of his wife. The young man will not let anyone get close, cannot make commitments to anyone or anything – even himself, sarcastically brushes off every attempt to help him. Finally, the breakthrough happens when he and his therapist acknowledge that both of them had been physically abused by drunken fathers. The therapist who is wounded by the loss of his wife and who has been holding the young man at arm's length by calling him "sport" or "chief," starts to call him "son." "It's not your fault," he tells the boy. "The fact that your father beat you is not your fault." The boy resists – pushes the therapist away. It's too close, too intimate … "It's not your fault…it's not your fault," until finally the young man breaks down and falls into the therapist's arms. It is a moment of redemption and grace and hope and salvation.

In the very depth of our being we never stop needing and looking for the blessing which is a father's and a mother's to give. And the stunning affirmation of Jesus, as he taught his friends to pray, is that the holy one, the creator of all the words that are, the one whose name is not written or said, is the giver of the blessing, wants to give the blessing, is the father – the mother – who is present, who invites us to come with our fears, our hopes, our disappointments, our joys, our passion, our love.

The prayer Jesus taught invites us to address that God with the most intimate terms we have: to stop speculating about the existence and attributes of God and to communicate with God. This faith of ours is not finally about rules. It is not about brilliant, rational theology. It is about a personal relationship with God, through God's son, Jesus Christ. "When you pray, say – Father." It was the most stunning thing he said about God.

And it comes to us as invitation. If you stopped praying long ago, you are invited to say simply – "Father"– or "Mother."

If you don't pray because you are too busy – you can say, "Father/Mother." It can be your mantra – your personal breath-prayer. You can say it when you shower or shave, in the train, in the car, over lunch, rushing through your day. It will be enough. It is all you need to say. "Father."

And, if there is a long and deep silence between you and God; if you don't pray personally because you don't know what it's about and it doesn't seem to work and besides it feels a little silly and if your mind wanders during our extended time of prayer together and generally you've given it up – you, particularly – are invited to break the silence and to say the boldest word anyone ever thought to say about God and themselves.

"When you pray, say …Father." Amen.